First Traces of Media Contamination in Japanese Cinema of the 1960s

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Over the last twenty years, film researchers have more and more often talked about the possible involvements and contamination among the media, particularly in relation to Japanese culture. Good examples, when talking about most of Japanese movies nowadays, are not only the widespread references to mangas, the well-known Japanese comic-strips, but also a great amount of easily recognizable links among television, novels, theatre, advertising, music, painting, videogames, trailers, web art and computer graphics. Therefore, making use of the recent studies on hypermedia to analyse what link together these different semantic fields is not out of place, starting from Umberto Eco's comment according to which today's media pretends to refer to the real world, but in fact it refers to other media.

The instances of such involvements have certainly multiplied in the last years, giving place to particular synergies around a single topic, such as—in an interchangeable order—the transposition of a plot from a manga to a videogame, then to the television series, its cinematographic version and finally its novelization. However, hybridism among the media is not a really new phenomenon in Japan. Not only does the dawning of Japanese cinema drive its roots in both the repertoire and style of Kabuki and the performances of the popular ballad singers of the past, but also in several periods of its history the world of moving images has taken advantage of the languages common to other media. Just to mention a few instances, you only have to think of the role played by *benshi*, the old commentators of silent movies. It was up to them to perform the adaptation and reinvention of the original texts, to explain the cinematographic, narrative and theatrical techniques, to suggest pictorial readings of the scenes, and to make the musical accompaniment and mime coherent with the plot.

Another example taken from the same period is the one represented by the famous movie *Kurutta ippeiji* ("A Page of Madness"), directed in 1926 by Kinugasa Teinosuke, which is an unequalled experiment to fuse theatrical, literary and pictorial elements by means of the sole perceptive sensations. Otherwise let's consider during the same period a number of slapstick comedies, and among others the ones directed by Ozu Yasujirō, which borrowed real-life episodes through symbolic procedures characteristic of the world of variety. Or else the narrative modalities of the "*nyūsu eiga*", the newsreel produced in wartime, which blended information with a fusion of fiction and dramatic simulation. Finally, we have seen how in the post-war period there had been in Japan a mixture of folk culture—apparently derived from vaudeville and feuilleton—together with American and European hybridisms and the expressive languages of advertising and love romances.

We should consider beforehand, however, that it is only starting from the second half of 1950s, when the birth of television broadcasting had already marked a turning point in the whole world of show business, that the cultural diet for the audience had been methodically connoted. In relation to the growing cultural offer, the audience was then compelled to actively interact with the works, thus gaining a pilot role in the production system. Production companies also had to identify, more than in the past, the existence of different typologies of audiences. More than before, they considered cinematographic works addressed to women, to young people, and so on, trying to define a group of genres which at the same time carry easily recognizable meanings and may accomplish the audience's dictatorship. It is not a sheer chance that right in those years many stylistic elements were brought to perfection. Among others, settings like haunted houses in horror movies, the fetishistic

objects in the erotic cinema, heroes and villains in action movies, in both cases performed by movie stars like Takakura Ken, the characteristics of the heroes, such as being wanderers and thus outsiders in many *jidaigeki* (period films) and *yakuza* movies and finally musical styles with genre-melodies which recall certain atmospheres.

Furthermore, starting from the second half of 1950s film remakes and adaptations had more or less freely multiplied. Whereas on the one hand the adaptations based on a fixed pattern continued like *Chūshingura* and *Daibosatsutōge*, on the other hand the series with unsettled structures like *Yotsuya kaidan*, or else related to a single character's exploits, like the *Zatōichi* series, more and more contaminated with other media elements, became very successful.

This production system further intensified during 1960s when film genres were produced in a more detailed organization which divided cinema in A and B-movies distributed in famous cinema halls or alternatively in small club-like movie theatres. Thanks to the quotation among the media now easily recognizable in given genres, the audience was able to select a work according to their own personal experience, so that fiction was gradually filled with elements taken from real life or, conversely, provided a point of reference for life in general.

It was in that atmosphere that the new Japanese cinema of 1960s, the one introduced in this retrospective, found its way. Most of those young film directors, like their audience, had assimilated the contaminations of the last decade and often had also acquired a good knowledge of other non-Japanese cultures. It was thanks to them that we witnessed to a planned and competent fusion of different media. I will refer only to a few of the more notable examples of this period, but it would not be difficult to extend the comparison to many more movies.

In this sphere, a name prevailed over others: Ōshima Nagisa. In his filmography, many titles are fit for this study, first of all the short movie *Yunbogi no nikki* directed in 1965. While travelling in South Korea, Ōshima had taken a long series of black and white pictures of many extremely poor children with an EE Camera. Back to Japan and after one year, the publication of the book *The Diary of Yunbogi* written by Yi Yunbogi, a ten-year old Korean boy, gave Ōshima the cue to direct a 16 mm movie using the diary as a base for the screenplay and the comment of the pictures taken in Korea. It thus became a unique technique of narrative description made by means of fixed frames. The basis of the story is not aimed at telling Yunbogi's personal experience, but, according to Ōshima, talking about the "conditions

of all Asian people". To give his movie the sense of an accusation, in primis against Japan itself seen as a colonizing country, he decided to express this topic through photography. Quoting *La chambre claire* by Roland Barthes, a photograph "is always the subject of three activities: doing, undergoing, watching". It is "a sheer contingency because it cannot be anything else but what it is", because "it immediately reveals those particulars which precisely constitute the material of ethnological learning". In this movie, only a voice-over narration contributes to create the coherence of a cinematographical flow, while photography compels a voyeuristic approach, offering the images straight to the glance with no ideological screens.

One year later, in 1966, Ōshima made a new experiment of hybridism directing a movie where he shot the pictures of the best-seller strip writer Shirato Sanpei's famous manga entitled *Ninja bugeichō* ("Manual of Ninja Martial Arts"). This is not an animated movie but, like in the case of *Yunbogi no nikki*, a new series of fixed frames, a story told by means of paintings. Through this parcelling out of the images, Ōshima succeeded in expressing the theme of the original strips about a revolt which had taken place in Japan during the sixteenth century, and together he could evocate the similar social situation of Japan in 1960s. At the same time, denying the cinematographical flow and movement, he could also make what he called "a criticism against the *jidaigeki*", whose essence in those years mostly consisted of action.

Even *Ai no koriida* ("In the Realm of the Senses", 1976), one of Ōshima's most famous movies, contains a good deal of hybridism. The plot is based on a true incident that happened in 1930s. A man and a woman escaped from their life to make love to death. In the end, the woman survives, keeping with her the severed penis of her dead lover. Film critics have often underlined the prominent theatrical elements contained in this movie, that is the space diegesis conceived as a three wall stage, therefore the absence of a space-off, useful to contextualize the *amour fou*; Kabuki-like suspensions (in Japanese called *mie*) and reiterations; Bunraku's typical stylization; comical inserts which recall scenes of Kappore theatre. Nontheless, in particular in the erotic scenes, visual economy is also important, especially in the "seeing while being seen" moments, and winks at certain auteur comic strips. At the same time, they recall the so called *shunga*, the erotic painting masterpieces of the Tokugawa era, because of the particular use of lighting and of the lively colours given on wide surfaces.

A similar process, even if more intensely built on the fusion of different media, and especially poetry, music, literature and theatre, is expressed by Shinoda Masahiro's world famous *Shinjū ten no Amijima* ("Double Suicide at Amijima", 1969). The original work had been a drama adapted for the Bunraku theater by Chikamatsu Monzaemon during the Tokugawa period. The story tells of a man who works as a paper merchant, is married to a lovely woman but falls hopelessly in love with a courtesan with whom he decides to commit double suicide in the end because their love affair in socially forbidden. In Shinoda's movie, the whole narrative structure is suspended between reality and fiction, also thanks to the screenplay written by Shinoda together with the poetess Tomioka Taeko and the composer Takemitsu Tōru. Shinoda, as many other film directors of his generation, has often underlined the need for the individual to operate an act of force against society—*gyakusatsu* meaning massacre and therefore crime. Selecting a theatrical background gives then the opportunity to justify crime through a dream-like atmosphere. This movie's roots, rather than in Kabuki or Bunraku, lie in Kara Jūrō's *jōkyō gekijō* (situation theatre) according to which each performance must be addressed to an audience not necessarily cultured, but receptive towards the violence and desires performed on the stage. By means of a gestalt articulation of the whole narrative structure, Shinoda also broadens each sign meaning, gaining the same effect of the musical rhythm of Nō theatre. Tripartite in *jo ha kyū* (that is introduction, development and conclusion), the atonal rhythm of Nō music totally submit the concept of time and movement to its theatrical form. In other words, each movement of acceleration, rhythmical undulation, suspension or crystallization must evocate all the iconic objects, including actors, presented on the stage.

The film director Teshigahara Hiroshi was the author of other important examples of cinematographical hybridism, also because of his own cultural background. He was the son of the famous Ikebana master Sōfu, the founder of the Sōgetsu school which Hiroshi also would have later devoted himself to. He had at first conducted

his studies in the field of oil painting and his first steps towards the cultural world had taken place in the group "Seiki no kai", Association of the Century, together with other young intellectuals like the writer Abe Kōbō. In his cinema, and especially in the first movies directed during 1960s, the particular mixture among moving images, literature, painting and music was constant. Starting from his first fiction film, *Otoshiana* ("The Pitfall", 1962), a movie with strong surrealist tones where dreamlike dimension and documentarism alternate in what sometimes becomes an extreme use of symbolic effects, Teshigahara chose the painting repertoire he well knew to shape the state of anxiety the individual feels while searching for his own identity. Here photography is given through extreme nuances of black and white, thanks to an elaborate lighting support. Camera movements are made by sharp angles, showing the images as if taken through cracks in the walls. The general effect is of a kind of tableau vivant, time being suspended.

One of the most interesting examples of fusion among the media is represented by fiction cinema blended with journalism. What links them together is the principle that information must seem as "true" and coherent as possible. As underlined by Martin Engebretsen in one of his essays on hypermedia, "the journalist is forced into a 'strong' interpretation of the fragments of reality that one has access to through observation and source information", since journalistic text, like narrative, "demands certain archetype actors ('heroes' and 'villains'), an element of drama and an implied moral". It is on a similar basis that Imamura Shōhei, in 1967, directed his inquiry movie *Ningen jōhatsu* ("A Man Vanishes"). The actor Tsuyuguchi Shigeru interviewed a number of people who had dealt with a man who vanished later, trying to reveal this mystery. Among the names listed in the credits, Imamura included all the cast—the interviewer, the vanished man's girlfriend, her elder sister and Imamura himself since he appeared in the final part of the movie. As the camera concentrated on each character's reaction and the vanished man was gradually ignored, the artifices of the interviewer's inquiry got more and more highlighted. The young woman by degrees lost her interest in the man and felt attracted to the interviewer; the camera itself, previously completely hidden, revealed itself together with the staff and all the other devices. What at first could be called information and was related to the disappearance of a man, is gradually betrayed by dramatic needs particular to life itself.

Many other instances of fusion among the media could be included in this review—among cinema, painting and comic strips found in most of Suzuki Seijun's work; between cinema and poetry in Kuroki Kazuo's first feature film *Tobenai chinmoku*, and so on. However, it was especially with Terayama Shūji during the 1970s that contamination seemed to be the rule. When Terayama started making movies, his name was already very famous because of his activities as a poet, essayist, scriptwriter, writer of radio programs and especially a counter-current playwright. All experiences which continued in his movies together with new experiments in the field of painting and music. Thanks to this elaborate media blend, his movie *Den'en ni shisu* ("Pastoral to Die in the Country", 1974) became one of the most interesting films of the decade, but most of all regarding his short movies, and because of their brevity, he produced the newest and oddest outcomes.

From the experiments carried out during 1970s onwards, in Japan the tendency to contaminate the cinema with other media has increased more and more. You only have to think of the huge commercial system created by the editor and producer Kadokawa Haruki by mixing cinema, mass literature, advertising and information. Nowadays, new media like videogames, music videos, commercials and film trailers have joined the ones mentioned above, contributing to making the stylistic structure of Japanese cinema even more complex and visually enchanting.